



Love in Eileen Chang's works: Distinctive and ideological

Nguyen Ngoc Khai Linh

High School for the Gifted, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Received: 09 Jul 2023; Received in revised form: 12 Aug 2023; Accepted: 20 Aug 2023; Available online: 27 Aug 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— In the realm of literature, the exploration of love has perpetually fascinated both creators and readers, serving as a dynamic mirror reflecting shifts in societal norms, cultural undercurrents, and ideological tides. Across the epochs, the portrayal of love within literary works has undergone a profound evolution. In the tapestry of classical Chinese literature, characterized by draconian dogmas and entrenched male chauvinism during the feudal era, women were often relegated to subordinate roles, their experiences of love marred by silent endurance. However, a literary luminary emerged who infused new vitality into the depiction of affection – Eileen Chang. Her narratives transcended conventions, empowering individuals of all genders to articulate their emotions boldly, resist societal constraints, and challenge the forces that dictated their fates. Within the intricate weave of her prose, love ceased to be a mere sentiment; instead, it emerged as an indomitable force of defiance and liberation. This research article delves meticulously into the exquisite tapestry of love woven by Eileen Chang, casting a spotlight on its enduring essence and providing a contemporary evaluation that harmonizes with modern perspectives.

Keywords— Chinese literature, Contemporary literature, Eileen Chang, Feminism, Love

I. INTRODUCTION

Eileen Chang (also known as Zhang Ailing 张爱玲) stands as an illustrious figure in the realm of Chinese contemporary literature. Despite her prolific literary output from a young age, it wasn't until the publication of "Chenxiang Xie – Diyi Luxiang" 沉香屑 第一炉香 (Aloe Ashes – The First Burning) in the esteemed Shanghai magazine "Zilanlou" 紫罗兰 (Violet) in 1943 that she garnered significant recognition within literary circles. Subsequent years witnessed a succession of captivating and widely acclaimed narratives, including "The Golden Cangue" 金鎖記, "Love in a Fallen City" 傾城之戀, "Red Rose, White Rose" 紅玫瑰與白玫瑰 and "Lust, Caution" 色戒. Yet, amid the tumultuous backdrop of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, political forces cast a shadow on scholarly explorations of Eileen Chang and her literary opus. Despite these vicissitudes, scholars have resoundingly affirmed that Chang's indelible legacy and

literary contributions remain indispensable keystones within Chinese literary discourse.

However, the current landscape evinces a relative scarcity in scholarly endeavors dedicated to Eileen Chang and her literary corpus. A discernible decline in research output and analytical essays has emerged, marking a departure from prior epochs. However, literature itself is an embodiment of life, adapting to the ever-evolving societal tapestry. Over the passage of time, societal transformations invariably reshape the lens through which literary research is undertaken. While antecedent investigations often gravitated towards theoretical underpinnings and Chang's mastery of the written word, such as in "A Theoretical Study of Zhang Ailing's Short Story Collection" (Lin Wei-Hsin) and "The Construction of Eileen Chang's Image in Different Periods" (Yaqi Zhao, Guicheng Zhuang) and "Eileen Chang's Feminine Chinese Modernity: Dysfunctional Marriages, Hysterical Women, and the Primordial Eugenic Threat" (Rachel Leng) - this research, in the year 2023, endeavors to delve into the intricacies of love within Eileen Chang's narratives - a thematic terrain

both familiar and yet relatively uncharted within her works. Through this lens, a panoramic view of Eileen Chang's conception of love at the juncture of her creative output shall be unveiled, juxtaposed against the backdrop of contemporary ideological vistas emerging in the era of modern technology.

The ascent of Eileen Chang's prominence within the literary firmament can be attributed to myriad factors. Foremost among these is her distinct and singular perspective, which stood in stark contrast to the prevailing norms concerning women during her era. In a milieu characterized by tumultuous political upheavals, societal corrosion, and the deluge of war, many of her contemporaries gravitated towards themes of resolute determination, moral rectitude, and patriotic fervor. Consequently, the realm of literature largely relegated love to a peripheral role, overshadowed by weightier concerns. However, Eileen Chang charted a different trajectory. In an era where the emergence of female writers was an exceptional rarity, her unique voice shone resplendently. Focusing her gaze intently upon the intricacies of human relationships, she once remarked, "I choose to capture the minutiae of interactions between men and women. My narratives eschew the theatrics of wars and revolutions, preferring instead to illuminate the nuanced terrain of amorous entanglements." Even when political currents made fleeting appearances, as exemplified in "Lust, Caution" they assumed auxiliary roles, mere silhouettes on the periphery of her central narrative tapestry. Love, in the expanse of Eileen Chang's literary canvases, emerges as an unmistakably salient and recurrent motif. However, this love is far from a vacuous or inert sentiment; rather, it unfurls as a vibrant, soul-stirring, and ardently passionate tapestry of emotions. In so doing, Eileen Chang adroitly crafts a mosaic that encompasses her own introspections, philosophical musings on the human condition, and intricate worldviews - each infused with an unwavering commitment to dismantling feudal norms and resounding echoes of feminist defiance.

II. LOVE IN EILEEN CHANG'S WORKS: HUMAN CONDITIONS

1. Women

The female protagonists in Eileen Chang's novels and short stories predominantly hail from the middle-class echelons of Shanghai and Hong Kong, navigating the turbulent waters of their respective eras. These women are enveloped in a complex interplay of love, desire, power, and wealth, set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society and the turmoil of the wartime upheavals. Their narratives often unfold against a tapestry of adversity,

marked by fates shadowed with widowhood, premature maturity, familial abandonment (as evidenced in Bai Liusu - "Love in a Fallen City"), espionage, exploitative circumstances (as exemplified in Wang Chia-chih - "Lust, Caution"), the challenges of nurturing under duress, marital neglect (as depicted in "Steamed Osmanthus Flower: Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn" 桂花蒸·阿小悲秋), concubinage, and daily struggles with envy (as portrayed in Chunyu Dunfeng - "Traces of Love" 留情). Yet, these female protagonists seldom bask in contentment. They embody the ebb and flow of the human condition, grappling with life's vicissitudes and emotional tempests. Consequently, when entangled in the complexities of men's affections, their engagement is often restrained. Their approach to love is marked not by superficiality but by deliberation, intrigue, intentionality, and at times, pragmatic motives. Despite their multifaceted nature and mischievous tendencies, Eileen Chang preserves their innate femininity, rendering them susceptible to the allure of love. Amid the labyrinth of trials, anxieties, calculations, and intrigues, these women ultimately unveil their capacity for profound and genuine love.

Eileen Chang's female protagonists defy the traditional constraints of feudal women, transcending the boundaries of archaic norms. No longer beholden to rigid dogmas, they cast off the veils of timidity, shedding the vestiges of virginity and age-related expectations. Eileen Chang deftly forges an entirely novel archetype of women, intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life and the complex societal dynamics of that era. In this endeavor, she injects her narratives with a resounding feminism, setting herself apart from her literary precursors in both poetry and storytelling.

In essence, Eileen Chang's female characters encapsulate the internal contradictions that women navigate as they traverse the realms of fame, fortune, and love, while juggling collective and personal aspirations. These characters emerge as emblematic figures of a transitional epoch, embodying the struggle of reconciling Confucian traditions with the audacity to articulate individual thoughts. Eileen Chang's masterful portrayal of women in love stands as a testament, carving a distinctive niche that marries unwavering strength with a gentle tenderness, a portrayal rarely equaled in the literary realm.

2. Men

In stark contrast to the harrowing circumstances faced by the women in Eileen Chang's narratives, her male characters emerge as figures of affluence, influence, and privilege. Among them, one encounters the likes of prosperous sheriffs who wield dominion over life and death, exemplified by the enigmatic Mr. Yee in "Lust,

Caution". Fan Liuyan in "Love in a Fallen City" embodies the scion of a prosperous lineage, while Mi Raozheng in "Traces of Love" personifies a dignified and well-mannered businessman. The suave intellectual and heartthrob Tong Zhenbao from "Red Rose, White Rose" commands respect, yet paradoxically, these men are ensnared in a web of solitude, suspicion, and latent anxieties, unspoken and concealed.

Even Mr. Yee, an unflinching figure responsible for countless lives, navigates existence in a state of perpetual isolation and doubt. Similarly, Mr. Gerda from "Steamed Osmanthus Flower: Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn" yearns for adoration yet remains skeptical of love, restrained by his own lack of courage to surrender to its capricious embrace. The once ardent Tong Zhenbao, too, surrenders his infatuation as "Liu Xia Hui" 柳下惠. Meanwhile, Fan Liuyan, entangled in the web of societal judgment, bears the weight of unfounded accusations, unfairly tarnishing his family's legacy.

While the female personas in Eileen Chang's stories bear the heavy yoke of destitution and dire destinies, their male counterparts bask in opulence, wealth, reputation, authority, and knowledge, yet remain deprived of the solace of love. Amid their ranks, some have forsaken belief in the bonds between genders, while others view love as a restorative tonic. Certain men, bound by the fear of its inevitable dissolution, endeavor to stifle their emotions, straitjacketed by societal expectations.

Amidst the Confucian tenets and draconian doctrines that often stifle such expressions, conventional writers rarely allow male characters to unveil such fragile and solitary sentiments, entrenched as they are in the feudal paradigm dictating that men must stoically provide for their female counterparts. Eileen Chang, however, defies these conventions, challenging the norms with an unwavering feminism that remains tempered with compassion and empathy towards men. Her male characters embody their humanity, openly revealing vulnerabilities and grappling with solitude. Within her narratives, these men find themselves liberated to voice their innermost desires, all while retaining the dignity and decorum befitting their gender - a delicate equilibrium of impassioned love balanced by reason.

III. EMBRACING IDEOLOGICAL MESSAGES: LOVE AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

In the pursuit of literary immortality, a work must transcend its pages to embody profound ideological values. Eileen Chang's oeuvre exemplifies this principle. Central to her narrative tapestry is an unwavering feminist voice, a

rarity within the confines of traditional Chinese feudal literature and its underlying conceptions. Within her tales, readers are confronted with poignant moments where a concubine dares to articulate her inner turmoil, her heartache stemming from a love that remains solitary and unfulfilled. Take, for instance, Chunyu Dunfeng in "Traces of Love", who unabashedly airs her grievances, highlighting her husband's unwavering devotion to his first wife. Equally compelling is Wang Chia-chih in "Lust, Caution", whose bold embrace of personal love unveils a secret conspiracy, culminating in a failed mission. And then there is the indomitable Bai Liusu in "Love in a Fallen City", a widow who, despite societal expectations, steadfastly charts a course towards her own happiness. These narrative instances stand as eloquent testaments to Eileen Chang's unyielding anti-feudal stance, cementing her legacy as one of the most exceptional and pioneering female authors of her era.

Furthermore, within the intricacies of Eileen Chang's prose, both male and female characters emanate an ethos of liberation and progression. Their romantic bonds defy ephemeral societal norms - whether constrained by suitable alliances, age-imposed limitations, the specter of chastity, or the ceaseless whispers of societal judgment. These unions germinate from the convergence of kindred souls, seeking solace and completion in each other's presence. Men, driven by an unwavering resolve, unabashedly embrace love for widows, transcending conventions and persisting despite the weight of unfair advantages. In parallel, women cast aside the shackles of feudal Confucian norms, embarking on their personal journeys towards happiness, unabashedly voicing their affections, and fearlessly spotlighting the injustices that punctuate their daily lives.

Eileen Chang's portrayal of love transcends the conventional; it rejects facile categorization and surmounts patriarchal paradigms. Within this intricate web of emotions, men and women stand as equals, bound neither by artificial divides nor societal expectations. Wives engage in candid conversations with husbands, as poignantly depicted in "Traces of Love" and "Steamed Osmanthus Flower: Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn". Similarly, women boldly partake in intimate tête-à-tête dialogues with men, exemplified in "Love in a Fallen City". The feminism and anti-feudal spirit woven into Eileen Chang's characters' relationships, whether in specific instances or within the broader narrative scope, ardently strive for authentic equality - among individuals and across the vast fabric of human existence.

IV. EILEEN CHANG'S PENMANSHIP: ELEGANCE IN EXPRESSION

A significant segment of the populace categorizes Eileen Chang's literary creations as "yán qíng" 言情 or romantic novels. However, her depiction of love transcends this classification. Firstly, the love she artfully constructs serves as a conduit for conveying timeless ideological insights, defying myriad feudal constraints. Secondly, Eileen Chang's mastery of penmanship attains a pinnacle of refinement in style.

In Eileen Chang's narratives, expressions of love - including flirtatious exchanges and matters of sexual nature - are executed not with vulgarity, but with a remarkable finesse and subtlety. Even when addressing sexual desire, she portrays it as an ordinary facet of daily existence, devoid of hesitancy or shame. Employing terminology that departs from rigid feudal conventions - words such as "nipples" or "armpit" - Eileen Chang seamlessly maintains her signature gentle and decorous narrative tone. Readers of her works traverse the gamut of emotions within a context of normalcy and tasteful literary ambiance. Consequently, Eileen Chang's creations have never been relegated to the realm of erotic literature. Throughout history, love and sexual desire have walked hand in hand, yet many writers have avoided these subjects due to their perceived sensitivity. Eileen Chang, however, boldly diverges from this norm, treating sexual matters as integral to the human experience, conveyed with a natural and vibrant penmanship devoid of gratuitous prurience.

Eileen Chang adeptly brings internal conflicts to a crescendo when her characters grapple with paradoxical moments. A striking illustration of this occurs in her depiction of Wang Chia-chih's tumultuous emotional state in "Lust, Caution," where she is compelled to orchestrate the demise of her beloved. Presented with the heart-wrenching choice between executing the man who bestowed upon her a sense of cherished love and loyalty, or succumbing to her own yearnings and betraying a revolutionary cause, Wang Chia-chih embodies profound internal turmoil. Eileen Chang's portrayal of these inner struggles is far from pedantic or ponderous; it resounds with an authentic depiction of the complex mélange of emotions coursing through a woman's psyche.

Furthermore, Eileen Chang's narrative craftsmanship imbues her works with a lingering sense of poignant yearning. Her stories frequently conclude with a melancholic aura, characterized by unresolved endings. Every word and phrase etches indelible reflections within the reader's psyche. While Eileen Chang generally veers away from weaving overt political threads, choosing instead to tangentially allude to such factors, her stories

predominantly revolve around the theme of love. Love in her works ultimately thrives within the crucible of wartime turmoil, amidst an era that interweaves the influences of the Occident and the Orient, and during a transitional phase in history. In the face of sweeping societal transformations, Eileen Chang's distinct perspectives and emotions imbue her narratives with a spectrum of highs and lows. Her characters are ensnared within the throes of sorrowful human conditions, while her penmanship attains an exquisite refinement - much like the love that pervades the majority of her tales.

V. EVOLVING LEGACY: LOVE IN EILEEN CHANG'S WORKS THROUGH MODERN EYES

The portrayal of love in Eileen Chang's literary works transcends time and defies conventional thoughts and ideological paradigms of her era. It encompasses a profound and equitable connection between men and women - an unwavering bond that dares to challenge norms, fight for personal and shared happiness, and shrug off the weight of critical prejudices propagated by both society and the Confucian feudal system. Although Eileen Chang's stories were penned and published in the mid-1940s, they brim with innovative nuances that exude a striking modernity, prefiguring a love that resonates harmoniously with contemporary sensibilities.

In the present day, Eileen Chang stands as a quintessential figure representing feminist literature, amplifying the voices of countless women entrapped by antiquated and misleading conventions. Her legacy resides in her ability to forge an entirely novel image of love within the realm of Chinese contemporary literature. Love, as depicted in her works, emancipates itself from the straitjacket of Confucian rituals and feudal norms. Within this narrative domain, individuals from all strata of society, irrespective of their circumstances, yearn ardently to be cherished, understood, and authentically connected, unshackled from societal constraints that traditionally suppress their emotions. Eileen Chang's rendition of love is marked by its abruptness and inevitability, enabling male and female characters alike to tangibly experience the profound depth of their emotions.

Furthermore, despite being a prominent advocate of feminist literature, Eileen Chang's stories remain refreshingly devoid of weighty didacticism. The feminist spirit within her works isn't relegated to trite slogans; rather, it is masterfully woven into nuanced details. Women emerge as unflinching advocates for their happiness, unwaveringly voicing their desires and resolutely seeking fulfillment. However, within the realm of love, an intriguing equilibrium emerges where men and

women are cast on an equal footing. They converse openly, express their emotions unabashedly, and navigate their feelings as if no societal barriers exist - a testament to the underlying essence of two souls intermingling, unburdened by artificial hierarchies. This symmetrical portrayal of love, emerging amidst the backdrop of tumultuous times and entrenched male-centric societies, encapsulates Eileen Chang's aspirational vision - a realm where love transcends societal divides and flourishes as a sublime, egalitarian force.

This nuanced exploration of love in Eileen Chang's literary creations stands as a pivotal contribution to the realms of both literature and gender dynamics, fostering a profound impact that resonates across temporal boundaries.

VI. CONCLUSION

In summation, the portrayal of love within Eileen Chang's literary tapestry stands out as a unique and distinctive departure from the narratives and verses of preceding Chinese literary traditions. This representation of love is refracted through the prism of a woman's perspective, yet it radiates with an intensity and profundity that sets it apart. The resonance of Eileen Chang's works, which garnered widespread attention and acclaim, owes much to this paradoxically familiar and exceptional thematic exploration.

Love, as depicted in Eileen Chang's narratives, is imbued with the complexities of unique human circumstances, interwoven with intricate conspiracies, and illuminated by the radiance of solitary souls. The internal conflicts that her male and female characters grapple with not only illuminate love's existence amidst tumultuous eras but also offer reflections on the enduring essence of love within the tranquil embrace of the present day. Moreover, these portrayals candidly chronicle the various stages of love that persist across the annals of human experience, seamlessly bridging the divides between temporal epochs.

Eileen Chang's literary finesse lies in her ability to unravel the multifaceted facets of love, revealing its diverse expressions and manifestations. Her narratives encapsulate love's resilience and tenacity, thriving within the crucible of adversity, and blossoming amid the serenity of contemporary life. Through her masterful penmanship, love is not merely confined to a singular narrative; rather, it emerges as a timeless and universal force, seamlessly threading its way through the intricate fabric of human existence.

In this manner, Eileen Chang's exploration of love not only constitutes a literary triumph but also a profound testament to the enduring human condition. Her distinctive

perspective, juxtaposed against the backdrop of shifting eras, paints a vibrant tableau of love's perpetual presence and unwavering significance - a poignant reminder that the tapestry of love is one that transcends time, tradition, and circumstance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Hsin. L. W. (2007). *A Theoretical Study of Zhang Ailing's Short Story Collection* (Doctor's thesis, University of London, London)
- [2] Yaqi. Z & Guicheng. Z. (2022). The Construction of Eileen Chang's Image in Different Periods. *Atlantis Press*, 652, 303-309.
- [3] Rachel. L. (2014). Eileen Chang's Feminine Chinese Modernity: Dysfunctional Marriages, Hysterical Women, and the Primordial Eugenic Threat. *Quarterly Journal of Chinese Studies*, 13-34.
- [4] Alzheeva. M. M, Shorvaeva. N. V, Mushaeva. O. K, Turdumatova. E. B, Chalbanova. K. V, Menkenova. K. V. (2021). Tragedy of a Women's Fate in the Works of Eileen Chang. *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 56-61. DOI: 10.15405/epsbs.2021.05.8
- [5] Yue. W. (2021). *Eileen Chang in Letters: A Chinese American Writer in Disapora, 1955-1995* (Master's thesis, McGill University, Montreal)
- [6] Linh. N. T. D. (2020). *Truong Ai Linh người tình của Thượng Hải*. HNUE Faculty of Philosophy. Retrieved May 11, 2023, from: <http://nguivan.hnue.edu.vn/Nghiên-cứu/Văn-h%E1%BB%8Dc-nước-ngoài/p/truong-ai-linh-nguoi-tinh-cua-thuong-hai-1429>
- [7] Phuong. N. T. L. (2011). *Đặc trưng bút pháp Trương Ái Linh* (Master's thesis, VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City).